

INDIA'S KILLER DISEASES



Figures don't tell the whole story

The 2002 data below from the World Health Organization, based on figures from the Government of India, would seem to indicate that heart disease is the most common killer of Indians, just as it was for Americans in the 1950s and '60s. Indeed, deaths from heart disease among urban Indians are on the rise, as better access to clean water, more healthy food and faster treatment allows city-dwellers to avoid contracting, or to live through, diseases that once would have killed them.

The figures don't tell the whole story, however, because they are necessarily based primarily on deaths in hospitals or under a doctor's care. That is not the scenario for most Indians, 73 percent of them rural. They don't die in hospitals, where the cause of death can be properly checked and recorded. Heart disease is actually rare among rural Indians, though cancer is common, caused from smoking, breathing others' smoke or breathing smoke from coal fires in confined places.

The latest Ministry of Health estimates are that 30 percent of Indians die of non-infectious diseases, such as cardiovascular problems, diabetes or accidents. However, the full toll from some diseases—AIDS, for example—simply cannot be accurately ascertained in a nation of 1.3 billion population.

India has about 9.5 million deaths a year, or about one-sixth of deaths worldwide, according to a research article in the February 2006 edition of *Public Library of Science Medicine*. It says more than three-quarters of deaths in India occur in the home and more than half of these do not have a certified cause.

Indians die at a younger age than Americans on average, a statistic driven by the high number of deaths in infancy and childhood. Two-thirds of Indians who die of infectious diseases are children. Lower respiratory infections take another 11 percent of Indians, two-thirds of them children. And seven percent of Indians die at birth.

—L.K.L.

Most Common Causes of Death in India 2002 (in %)

Cardiovascular diseases	27
Infectious and parasitic diseases	20
Including:	
Tuberculosis	4
HIV/AIDS	3
Diarrheal	4
Meningitis	1
Childhood cluster diseases	5
Respiratory infections	11
Unintentional injuries	8
Perinatal Conditions	7
Cancer	7
Respiratory diseases	6
Digestive diseases	3
Intentional injuries	3

Source: World Health Organization